

An Expressive Art Workshop

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The Overview

As a cancer patient in 2010, I began researching ways to deal with the stress that comes with battling disease. In the process, I discovered *visual journaling*. I used this very personal and transportable form of art as a way to document my journey through treatment. It helped me look beyond my circumstances and provided a way to share my experience, while receiving the therapeutic benefits of the process.

Today, I am cancer free and researching the ways in which art may help children with cancer. My goal is to create an expressive art workshop for children who have the disease and to provide them with an art kit that they will be able to take with them. A longer-term goal is to eventually see their work be on exhibit.

Why Art?

Although there have been no specific studies regarding the value of art for people with cancer, there is a wealth of information supporting the positive effects of art for people struggling with physical illnesses. The *American Cancer Society* is a “nationwide community-based voluntary health organization dedicated to eliminating cancer as a major health problem.”¹ Their website describes art as being “a way to help people manage physical and emotional problems” that may occur as a result of the disease. Their research reveals that many clinicians have observed and documented significant benefits among people who have used art therapy. In addition to that, practitioners believe it helps people express hidden emotions, reduces stress, fear, and anxiety, and provides a sense of freedom (Art Therapy, 2008).

Author, Iyna Caruso has written books and articles for The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Saturday Evening Post, Washington Post, and the History Channel Magazine, and more. In, *Art's Healing Powers*, Caruso (2009) shares what he believes to be indisputable growing evidence of art's therapeutic benefits (p. 70). Caruso is not promoting a specific program but presenting research from a collection of different programs that provides positive input for the benefits of art for patients of various diseases.

¹ The description for ACS is retrieved from <http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=13412>

Caruso studied information from: an art program that works with patients through Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota; a free monthly program for Alzheimer's patients through Museum of Modern Art in New York; art workshops offered at Hewlett House, a cancer-support resource center on Long Island; the University of Michigan Health System's Art Cart program; and from the experiences of an art therapist from the Levindale Hebrew Geriatric Center in Baltimore. Some of Caruso's (2009) findings included: Art helps ailing children gain some control over their helplessness; It reduces pain in cancer patients; Creating art results in the improvement in pain symptoms and significant reduction of anxiety and low mood; It allows suppressed emotions to surface; It stimulates neurological function; Creating art can assist in counteracting feelings of helplessness; It is a vehicle to communicate emotions that children may not be able to articulate; And finally, art has helped as much as any medication (p. 70-73).

Emily R. Johnson is an artist and expressive art therapist with Norton Cancer Institute at Kosair Children's Hospital. She graduated with a degree in studio art. After working for two years in a children's hospital as an art instructor, she went to graduate school and received her MA in Expressive Art Therapy.

In a segment from *Insight Communications Villionaire*, Johnson (2009) shares that a lot of the children she works with are very scared and angry. Artwork is a way for them to safely talk about these and other feelings. It provides a gateway for them to more adequately express what they are feeling when they may not have the language to do so. She explains that sometimes the children do not even know how they are feeling and those feelings come out through their artwork. She states, "Artwork provides children that do not have any control over their lives, to have an area that they do have control over" (Johnson, 2009).

For children, art provides a way to journal. Elizabeth Scott is a wellness coach, author, and health educator. She is an award-winning blogger with training in counseling, family therapy, and health psychology. Scott creates all the content on *About.com's* stress management site, and edits their *Healthy Monday Newsletter*. In her article *The Benefits of Journaling for Stress Management*, Scott (2011) states that the health benefits of journaling have been scientifically proven. She writes that journaling allows people to clarify their thoughts and feelings, thereby gaining valuable self-knowledge. It helps one process traumatic events and

illnesses by fully exploring and releasing the emotions involved. Scott (2011) forcefully states that journaling “strengthens the immune system and counteracts many of the negative effects of stress”. It is a good exercise for people who are not able to be physically active. She believes it is a great practice for overall stress reduction as well as self-knowledge and emotional healing.

Art has been successfully used to help children with cancer and help their family members cope with the disease. In 2011, an art exhibit was displayed at the Lombardi Cancer Center at Georgetown University Hospital, in Washington D.C. The exhibit was called *A Day I Will Never Forget* and featured artwork created by children with cancer and artwork by their family members. The project allowed children with cancer to express their feelings in a way that otherwise might not have happened.

Another program is the Children’s Art Program (CAP) at MD Anderson Cancer Center. The thirty-nine year old program, made possible with assistance from volunteers and art instructors, is for children diagnosed with cancer. It provides the opportunity for these children to work alongside each other, building a bond between them. As the children create art, they support, inspire, and encourage one another. Many children and parents have benefitted from the program and many participants eventually return to volunteer at the center. Shannan Murray, CAP’s executive director states, “During treatment so much is out of the patient’s control, but the time spent creating artwork allows each child to feel empowered. It’s a creative outlet that provides a way to look beyond the disease, and this offers the patient hope.”

CAP is a testimony to the benefits of an art program for children with cancer. What began as an idea, has returned more than \$30 million to programs that benefit pediatric cancer patients and their families, and has touched more than 26,000 pediatric patients and families. This research provided the necessary foundation needed to proceed with this independent research project.

The Workshop

The expressive art workshop for children with cancer and their families will be a yearly outreach program funded by and held at Treasure Coast Community Church in Jensen Beach, Florida. Area oncologist and the local *American Cancer Society* office will be notified well in

advance and sent information to distribute to patients. People will be asked to sign up so the appropriate amount of supplies can be bought, prepared, and set up.

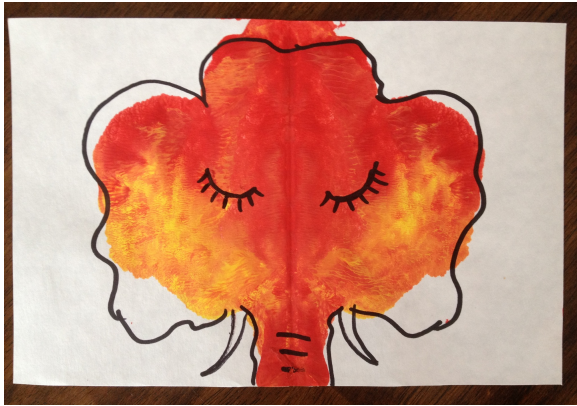
Special care will be taken in the preparation details beforehand. The art-making process will be simplified as much as possible. The art materials will be clean, easy to use, and non-toxic. Hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes will be available. The room will be odor and fragrance-free and consideration of the temperature and seating arrangements will be taken into account (Allen, n.d.).

There will be five stations, each staffed by church volunteers as well as local artists and art educators. The station volunteers will be asked to help any children that want help and to watch for any children struggling with the activities. These projects are available for the children to enjoy, not to cause stress. The children can choose the stations at which they would like to work.

Station one will be a collage project called *Who Am I?* This project takes into consideration the information from Caruso (2009), Géricot (2002), and Johnson (2009), that art projects on the subject of identity help children with diseases express their feelings. The children will create a collage that depicts components that make up their identity. They will receive a piece of construction paper and be asked to either write their name or draw a picture of them in the middle of it. This will represent them. Next they can draw pictures or glue pictures that depict things about them, such as a picture of a soccer ball if they like soccer. The station will include an array of pictures, paper, scissors, markers, and glue sticks.

Station two will be called *Decorate Me*. At this station children will get to choose from a variety of foam stickers, felt, and fabric paints to decorate hats. It is important for the hats to be made out of a soft natural fiber, like cotton and that there are no metal or rough surfaces.

Station three will have bright primary colored paint, white construction paper, markers, and syringes. The children will get a piece of folded, white construction paper (opened up). An adult will help them suck paint into the syringe and squirt a couple of drops of two different color paint on their paper. They will fold the paper in half at the crease and rub the paint around. Next, they will then open the paper up to discover what new color is made. They can use blow dryers to dry the paint and markers to create something out of their color creations.



(An example of a color creation.)

At station four the children will hear the story of Frida Kahlo and draw a self-portrait. From the article, *Workshop for Children with Cancer*, authors Géricot, Hartman, and Oppenheim (2002) believe it is through self-portrait that the children find a way to explore their identities and the effects of cancer on their lives. It helps the children to preserve their personal identity and reject the idea of being known only as a child with cancer (p. 345). The story of *Frida* by Jonah Winter is extremely helpful for children that struggle with disease. They can relate to her medical problems and continuous visits to hospitals and doctor's offices. Her use of art for the expression of her feelings, and share her thoughts, provides an example for them to follow.



(An example of a self-portrait.)

Station five will be a drawing table. Pencils, erasers, colored pencils, and markers will be available. Children will be given the topic *A Day I will Never Forget* and be allowed to sit and draw. Volunteers and artists will be on hand to encourage and engage their creative spark.



(An example of *A Day I will Never Forget*)

The Art Kit

How a child feels and how often they visit the doctor depends on the type and severity of his/her cancer. Some children may be in the hospital for over a month and others may only visit for tests every couple of weeks over several months. Some children sleep through treatments while others want things to do (N. Dennison, personal communication, 2013). Understanding from personal experience how difficult some of these trips can be, it is important for the children to have something to divert their attention from the reality of what is going on. To help with this, children with cancer will receive an art kit that can be taken with them for doctor's appointments, treatments, and tests. Wherever they are, however they feel, whatever they are thinking, they will have the tools they need to express themselves through art.

The kits will be stored in a lap desk with a storage compartment and handle making them easily portable. They will include disinfectant wipes; hand sanitizer; self-sticking foam shapes, jewels, etc. to decorate the medical masks they have to wear; pencils, eraser, a sharpener, colored pencils, a small visual journal, and an Anti-coloring book by Susan Striker (E. Delacruz, personal communication, 2013).

The following is a picture of lap desks available through Barnes & Noble. Eventually, production will begin of a similar transportable lap desk that includes a removable bottom made from washable material.



What is next?

The next step includes the physical work: setting a date, making flyers, contacting doctors, organizing volunteers, buying supplies, etc. and working with developers to create a washable lap desk. During my illness, art was instrumental in helping me cope with the stress and anxiety that comes from cancer. Through this venture, I hope to provide a small glimmer of light in a very dark situation. I believe Géricot, Hartman, and Oppenheim said it best in their article, *The Fine Arts Workshop for Children with Cancer*, “Art provides the children with a creative way to explore and express their experience of cancer. It helps the children recognize their value and has proved to be a rewarding experience. Cancer is a destructive disease, but it does not crush creativity” (2002, p. 345).

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